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AUTHOR Myers, Reney
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ABSTRACT

Typically, students justify their pursuit of a college education as being necessary for a well-paying job, rather than as a tool for themselves as individuals. Often college curricula are responsible for turning students away from knowledge for its own sake. But should an education be merely useful? The description of the Alphas in Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" as being the most creative and original persons with the greatest abilities and consequently as being more human, and of the worker Epsilons as being little more than robots, raises the question of whether colleges are educating students in a robotic way. Although students might reluctantly agree that humanities are valuable, much of student reluctance to develop interest in them stems from instructors' preoccupation with the mechanics and loss of sight of the purpose of their discipline. In the area of English, where writing assignments are vital to teaching, a better approach than topics of only superficial interest would be one with a more human aspect. In one class, for example, an impromptu discussion of Hamlet led the students to write about what they would have done in his position, thereby generating interest in the assignment as well as in the literature itself. As a humanities course, English should not be reduced to a mechanical level but rather should run the gamut of human experience. A return to literature in composition classes may encourage greater interest and depth in this. (HTH)

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On the Necessity of Being Human

Reney Myers

A few days ago, I corrected the papers of 80 freshmen, who revealed to me the mysteries of why they came to college. One and all, they cited the need for a "well paying job," one for which they required more education. I took note of this and I thought that it was fair enough. They were middle class or would-be middle class people preparing themselves for a middle class life. But a number of them cited other reasons as well. Many said that they wanted to broaden their horizons, to "meet new people." This, too, was natural. They were people who, in two or three years, would want to marry, and they evidently thought that the college was a good pond to fish in.

A few, however, cited a third reason, and these said they wanted a good education, to learn and know more. Now my experience with the students I have encountered is that these reactions are typical, and that the last reason is always a poor third. But it occurred to me that this should not be the case. As it is, for most of them, education is a tool to be used for social purposes, for a job and for marriage, but not for themselves as individuals. I suspect that this is often the case in the four year schools as well. Whatever the reasons are, whether in part, it is the cult of material things among them, or that a general education has bored them in the past, they are essentially omitting themselves from their plans for an education.

At my college, Middlesex, a student does not join the school. One is enrolled in a curriculum and, for the most part, studies for a specific career goal, which is what each curriculum aims at. The college itself then, helps to turn the student away from knowledge for its own sake, but emphasizes the kind of

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discipline which is useful in society. This is quite deliberate on the part of our educators, and reflects a view that has become increasingly popular among them in past years. John Dewey always insisted that "an education should be useful." I now wish to bring this idea into question, for I have encountered a number of experiences as a teacher which cause me to wonder whether this is true.

You will recall Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, in which society was divided into five broad strata. The highest level, that of the Alphas, included the most creative and original persons in that society. Their individualities were the most developed, their range of interest broadest, and their abilities highest. The next level, composed of Betas, consisted of people such as foremen, highly skilled in their social functions, but without the speculative, imaginative life which characterized the Alphas. The third level was that of the Gammas. These were the skilled workers of the society, as I recall. Next came the Deltas, the unskilled workers, and finally the Epsilons, who were sub-normal people, but who were still able to function socially. In Huxley's description, as one encountered various individuals, it quickly became evident that those people who were Alphas were the most human. In the few encounters one had with Epsilons, these people were little more than robots. This description illustrates the point and leads to a question: Are we educating young people in an essentially robotic way?

To some degree I should qualify this question, for many of the students would deny this. They may want precisely what the curricula offer, and, indeed, would like to avoid taking any liberal arts courses at all. One should, of course, take this into account, for the art of making educational decisions involves the preferences of the students as well as the acumen of the instructors. So to some extent, even as I suggest the

possibility that much of modern education does not give enough emphasis to things of the spirit, another side of my mind will confess to hesitations. One should not force anyone's essential nature, and I feel pretty certain that if students were polled on their preferences, they would want things pretty much as they are now, and would strongly object to more emphasis on liberal arts courses. But the question remains a valid one.

In considering this, one should define what is meant by "socially useful" studies. Obviously, business, nursing, and computer courses are socially useful, but they add a skill to the individual as well. A typing course, aside from business, may be said to enlarge a person's ability to communicate adequately, though it may not make a big difference. A computer science course, however, is a different matter, for it touches upon a world of extraordinary growth and complexity. At its higher levels, it becomes a genuine art. There are intrinsic differences, then, between one kind of socially useful study and another. The point is that some socially useful studies can be immensely rewarding on individual basis, just as the study of art and music can.

On the other side, it is also necessary to define what one means by a course which is not considered socially useful (some people would say useless!), such as the study of Latin, but which is still considered to be of value. From the students' point of view, those who want to "learn and know more," such courses must include, among other things, a knowledge of the human past. This not only means a knowledge of the history of their own and allied peoples, but also knowledge of how they lived, spoke and thought. They would also need to know something of the religious beliefs of these races, and of what they did to create things of beauty and monuments of the intellect. A study of this kind has traditionally been thought of as belonging to what one calls the "humanities." It involves the study of

what has made us individually human and, in the end, so affects the students that they, too, become a part of the human tradition. This is why it has such an inestimable value, and in the mind of the educator must be included, to some degree, in the curricula of students who come to college to be trained for a "good job."

The question, then, is to what degree should an emphasis in the humanities be given to courses in that area? In determining this, the views of students should also be taken into account. I believe that with the exception of a small minority, most students would reluctantly concede that humanities courses have a value for them. Their attitude might, perhaps, be described as analagous to disliking the taste of medecine while acknowledging that it is good for what ails them. And what ails them is a lack of knowledge about their human past and about themselves. Thus I would say that, after consideration, the students themselves would agree that they should get some exposure to the humanities.

. So far as teachers are concerned, the study of Latin may illustrate the point I would like to make. A Latin student begins by memorising vocabulary, becoming familiar with the study of verb forms, and so on. Could anything by more dull? Such an approach may postpone for years the reasons for the study of the language, which yields us knowledge of a magnificent ancient civilization. I am suggesting that much of the reluctance of students to develop an interest in humanities courses comes from such a preoccupation on the part of instructors with the details of their discipline that they have lost sight of the purpose which such details serve. But every Latin teacher knows something about the Romans, about Julius Caesar, Catullus, Caligula, Cicero, and all the others. There are an infinite number of ways in which the virility of Rome may be brought to life in a Latin class, and if this were brought to the consciousness of the teachers so that they conveyed it to their students, the interest of the latter would be immensely increased, without in any way interfering with their grammatical studies.

Now to speak of ourselves. As English teachers, we are committed to having our students write as much as possible. This is a correct approach, for many students are very weak in the mechanics of their language. But I would suggest that having them write about subjects which they have already written of in high school or which arouse only superficial responses from them is far from the best approach. I mean, "What did you do last summer?" and "Describe your best friend." Because of the emphasis on writing, the human element has tended to be abandoned in the English class, other than those of the superficial experiences of the students. The English discipline now largely omits any attention to a more vital and interesting area, that of literature.

To show the possibilities of this, let me cite another example. Last semester, one of the students asked me what Hamlet was all about. This came out of left field, for we were discussing mixed metaphors, and I had mentioned Hamlet in passing. But I stopped and outlined the problem which faced Hamlet. His father had died suddenly, and three months later his mother had married again with his uncle. Then, to his horror, Hamlet came upon evidence that his uncle had murdered his father. What was he to do? The class was much interested in this, so I carried it futher. I asked several students what each of them would have done. A heated discussion broke out, which lasted for the rest of the period, and even though I never got back to the mixed metaphors, I felt that this had been one of the best classes of the semester. I then had them write about what they would have done in Hamlet's position.

This discussion served a number of purposes. It afforded me a subject about which the interest of the class had been strongly aroused. It also gave the students a sense of the fact that Hamlet was interesting, and in a wider sense that

literature was. It made them more receptive to discussing other literary topics, such as Oedipus Rex, for example, which we read a little later on. It made their papers far more interesting than they ordinarily were, which meant that they were far more interested. I am, therefore, suggesting that the time is ripe for something of a return to literary matters in an English Composition class. The fact that the emphasis is on writing today does not mean that the most interesting area available to us should be abandoned. As English is a humanities course, it should not be reduced to a mechanical level. But by means of suitable themes suggested by literary works, the students' writing can achieve much more interest and depth. A humanities course should run the gamut of human experiences, which should be expressed in the students' writing.

I earlier cited the instance of computer technology, which can be considered to be an art at its higher levels. It seems to me that in a broad sense, many educators tend to forget this, to become so immersed in the details of their specialty that they lose the purpose for which it is to be used. It is the latter which captures the greatest interest of the students. This appears to be particularly true of English Composition students, who ache for something really interesting to be discussed in their classes, and so it underlines once again the necessity of being human. Finally, the socially useful is an intrinsic part of college training, but without an emphasis on the individually useful, education fails altogether, for it is an individual who comes to school. His or her individual development is what is at the heart of the process.